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THE MARRIED WIDOWS.

—:O:—

CHARACTERS.

CLARENCE, *Lieutenant on Leave.*

CLARA, } *The Married Widows.*
LOUISE, }

—
TIME.—THE PRESENT.

—
COSTUMES.—MORNING.

THE MARRIED WIDOWS.

SCENE.—*Drawing-Room in a Villa at Deadwood, inhabited by the two "Married Widows." Windows at back or side. Ordinary furniture, including two tables, R., and L., on each of which is a framed photo of a man, (the husbands of the widows, who are in Africa).*

CLARA is discovered standing R. LOUISE seated L., with a copy of "Matrimonial News" in her hand.

Clara. Well, Louise, dear, do you feel at all sorry for what you've done, at all nervous about the possible consequence?

Louise. Not in the smallest degree! Besides, my dear child, if we do get into any scrape, our names will not transpire; therefore, what does it matter?

Clara. That's very true.

Louise. (*Continuing.*) And should the enraptured adventurers pursue us too closely, and become more enterprising than we care about, they will one morning discover that the two will-o'-the-wisps, who, for a brief period flitted over the stagnant pools of Deadwood, have vanished into a less oppressive atmosphere, leaving their infatuated followers to flounder out of the morass their vanity had led them into.

Clara. (*Puts down newspaper.*) I shall be glad when we have

really vanished from this awfully dull place. Were it not for this little excitement we have prepared for ourselves, I really believe that the Coroner would shortly include, in his miscellaneous list, two deaths from "stagnation."

Louise. I wonder what Tom and Harry would say if they knew what they had driven their poor wives to, by leaving them in this dull, damp swamp.

Clara. (*Taking up photo of her husband from table, and talking to it.*) Yes, I wonder what you would say, Master Tom, were you to hear that, in the course of the next few days, some one will probably propose to your widow! (*Looking at photo.*) Oh, you may well look astonished! The news is, doubtless, startling, but it will be entirely your own fault, if some one, much better looking than yourself, (*aside, kissing photo*) if such a thing were possible, (*aloud*) answered the advertisement of a widow who wishes to re-marry, which I have inserted in the last number of the "Matrimonial News."

Louise. (*Same business with her husband's photo.*) And as for you, Harry, no one will be to blame but yourself if some good-looking man volunteers to fill the fearful void you have, by your premature decease, left in the heart of your relict. (*Looking at photo—same business exactly as CLARA'S.*) Oh, it's no use knitting your brows in that way; you should have thought of it before, and not have left me to vegetate among the water-cresses of Deadwood, while you devote your life to shooting Indians.

Clara. (*Pulling down photo.*) Were Tom to come across the May number of the "Matrimonial News," I hardly think he would recognise the wife of his bosom (*taking up newspaper*) in this advertisement. (*Reads aloud.*) "Two hundred and fifty-two. Genuine. 'Tired of a lonely life,' (*speaking*) how true, (*reading*) "a widow, with large blue eyes, and a profusion of light hair——"

Louise. (*Aside.*) How false!

Clara. (*Reading.*) "Wishes to correspond with a gentleman of strictly moral character——"

Louise. (*Aside.*) They're always the worst.

Clara. (*Reading.*) "Of strictly moral character, with a view to matrimony. Genuine is cheerful," (*speaking*) away from Deadwood, (*reading*) "musical, and independent, having a fine soprano voice, and a handsome annuity. Communications to be addressed to C., P.O., Deadwood, Hampshire."

Louise. (*Taking up newspaper.*) And I would stake my existence, that, if Harry were to guess a hundred times, he would never divine that number three hundred and six is his own Louise. (*Reads aloud.*) "Three hundred and six. A widow, who is pining for love, and sympathy, and anxious to make whole the fearful cavity in her heart." (*Speaking.*) I cribbed that from an old number. (*Reading.*) "The fearful cavity in her heart would be willing to exchange cartes de visito"—(*Speaking*)—of course I shall send my maid's—

(*reading*)—"with a good-looking gentleman,"—(*Speaking*)—they are all gentlemen in the "News"—(*Reading*)—"about thirty, with a view to make him happy. N.B.—No Clergy need apply. Letters to be addressed to L, Post Office, Deadwood, Hampshire."

Clara. I do wonder what sort of applications we shall get.

Louise. We shall know before long. I have sent Mary Jane to the office, where she's to wait till the post comes in.

Clara. (*Impatiently.*) I wish she'd make haste.

Louise. Putting aside for a moment, Clara, what we are both doing—forgetting that we are on the verge of theoretic bigamy—I wonder which of us two had the least to answer for in our ante-nuptial state.

Clara. (*Indignantly.*) How can you ask such a question? I had, of course. Why, you were in love half-a-dozen times before you met Harry.

Louise. Half-a-dozen times? No such luck! I never had but one flirtation—and that, goodness knows, was innocent enough.

Clara. Who was it with?

Louise. A youth who was reading for his commission, rather a good-looking boy, about sixteen. I, myself, was fifteen the day he asked me to elope with him. We exchanged love pledges. *Mine* was a lock of my governess' hair I cut off when she was asleep—he thought it was *mine*! *His* was a profile of himself, cut out in black paper, and shaded with gold. I have it to this day, in the secret drawer of this writing-desk. (*Points to writing-desk.*)

Louise. (*Astonished.*) In black paper, did you say?

Clara. Yes.

Louise. And, (*drawing profile in air with her hand*) looking that way?

Louise. Yes; looking that way, with gold shading, (*making sign from her own profile*) and one eyelash.

Clara. Had it a monstache?

Louise. The upper lip was embellished with a few golden bristles, which I do not remember remarking in the original. The boy had had them inserted for a small additional charge, because they looked manly.

Clara. How strange it is that, in the only episode of that kind in my otherwise unromantic life, I, too, should have been presented with a black profile, with (*same business as LOUISE—describing eyelash*) a developed eyelash. Photography was not quite so common in those days.

Louise. Art was in its infancy.

Clara. So was nature. Clarence had just turned fifteen when he proposed that, having no money to marry on, we should drown ourselves, hand in hand, off the pier.

Louise. Clarence did you say?

Clara. Yes, Clarence was the name of my profile.

Louise. (*Aside.*) How singular!

Clara. We met at the dancing academy. Clarence was going into the army.

Louise. (*Aside.*) Into the army! So was my Clarence.

Clara. (*Conceitedly.*) Well he fell in love with me, of course, the moment he saw me.

Louise. (*Aside—turning up her eyes.*) That's Clara all over.

Clara. And he used to walk up and down, for hours, in front of my window, (*imitating CLARENCE's attitude*) and place himself in desponding attitudes under the gas-lamp.

Louise. (*Aside.*) That's Clarence all over!

Clara. At last he came to lodge in the same house, on the floor above us, and, as his window was just over mine, we used to correspond through the primitive medium of a stone and a piece of string,
(*Makes explanatory gesture of stone being let down.*)

Louise. That was pretty well for a quiet innocent girl! But do tell me how it all went on.

Clara. How it all went on? Oh, in the usual way! Each day from his window he made bewitching signs, then he sent me verses which all spoke of love; what love meant I did not know, which he thought a trifle slow. I thought every word was true. To be sure he did not spell as well as he might, but on one theme he was always eloquent. That was love, and I know, now, why he thought me rather slow. But our bliss was short. One fine morning we were discovered, our fun was nipped in the bud, and I was shipped home in very low spirits.

Louise. And did you never see him again?

Clara. Never, but once. (*In a solemn way.*) That was in the cemetery.

Louise. (*Thinking the man dead.*) In the cemetery! (*Sadly.*) And only sixteen! Was it being "nipped in the bud" that killed him?

Clara. (*Naturally.*) Oh, dear, no! Nothing killed him; but we thought it a fitting spot to say farewell. It was there that he gave me (*pointing to her watch-chain*) this piece of money, with a hole in it, 'emblematic,' he sobbed, in military language, 'of his riddled heart.' It was in that appropriate atmosphere that we buried our blighted hopes, and swore eternal fidelity, registering our vows on the gravel in a monogram, consisting of our initials crossed.

Louise. (*Quickly.*) In love! What a romantic story!

Clara. (*Who has moved to window—looking out.*) Here comes Mary Jane up the street with some letters in her hand. She thinks we're advertising for a new servant. Why, I declare, some one's stopping to talk to her. What can he be saying to her? He's pointing to the letters.

Louise. I'll go and meet her; I can't wait. (*Is leaving.*)

Clara. (*Stopping her.*) No, you sent her. It will look more natural if I meet her, by chance. I'm dying to see what they say.

Louise. Fancy my knowing Clara all these years, and never hearing that story before! How *sly* of her! And how very strange that he should be called Clarence! And that *he, too*, should be destined for the army. For one moment I fancied he might be the same boy who asked me to elope with him from Miss Prude's, but that would be *too* ridiculous. I don't even remember what *my* boy was like. I might refresh my memory as to his profile in black and gold by going to my desk, but were I to meet him in full face, in his natural color, I feel convinced I should not recognize him.

Re-enter CLARA, with two letters.

Clara. (Delighted.) One for each of us, Lou'! and the writer of one of them will be here in a few minutes. Mary Jane, thinking he was the new footman——

Louise. Complimentary!

Clara. Told him where we lived. He was evidently watching to see who called for his letters. But he'll be here in a few minutes, so we had better settle on our plan of action. I don't think, dear, that we had better both see him at the same time; it might frighten him.

Louise. Oh, if you think he's likely to be nervous, you shall have him all to yourself, *first*, on condition that I have an interview with him afterwards; but we'd better run through the answers, so as to get a sort of line for our conversation. I wonder which he's the author of. I'll read mine first. (*Reads out loud—letting envelope fall on ground.*) "Six hundred and two. An officer, fair to look upon," (*speaking*) did you ever hear such conceit? (*reads again*) "aged thirty, but *looks* younger, whose income is, alas, unequal to his wants, wishes to part with himself to a lady of independent means. His disposition is so sweet that no woman could fail to love him. Six hundred and two is thoroughly domesticated; but, as he, at present, has no fixed home, a romantic existence may be looked forward to with confidence. Full length carte, in *uniform*, with Editor. Six hundred and two thinks that three hundred and six might suit. Perhaps she'll write to C., care of Editor." (*Speaking.*) Don't he wish he may get it?

Clara. That man is simply impossible. His price is similar to that put by the owners of pugs on their favorites, when they send them to the Dog Show. It means that he's not to be sold.

Louise. Not to be sold, (*snapping her fingers*) we'll see about *that*. Now for *yours*.

Clara. (Reads.) "One thousand, three hundred and four. An officer in the army, on leave of absence, wishes to take out a wife when he returns. One thousand, three hundred and four is by no means ugly, is slightly sentimental," (*speaking*) I like *that*, (*reading*) "and very musical——"

Louise. Plays on several instruments, including his own trumpet.

Clara. (*Continuing.*) "Having composed a waltz equal to any of Strauss."

Louise. (*Laughing.*) I thought so.

Clara. (*Continuing.*) "One thousand, three hundred and four is only a captain at present."

Louise. We didn't advertise for a major-general.

Clara. (*Continuing.*) "But as his regiment is quartered at the most insalubrious station in the West, he will, in all probability, command it before long, and can, therefore, guarantee his wife a good position in that country, where ladies are made so much of, Address C., care of Editor." (*Speaking.*) That reads rather better. Don't you think so, dear?

Louise. You like him because he's sentimental. I think that's dreadful twaddle! (*Knock at door is heard.*) But here he comes, so I'll be off. (*Exit.*)

Enter CLARENCE, on tiptoe, unseen by CLARA, who, having hidden the "Matrimonial News," sits in arm-chair, with her back turned to the door.

Clarence. I've crossed the hall in safety. Luckily there is no trace of full-grown brothers. No smell of cigar smoke there, no hats, and no sticks. Nothing to interfere with me. Now, which shall it be—three hundred and six or two hundred and fifty-two? Which of the charmers has the tin?

Clara. (*With back turned.*) Who's there? I thought I heard a voice! Come in!

Clarence. (*Advancing to CLARA.*) 'Tis a poor supplicant at the widow's shrine.

Clara. (*Aside.*) I divine that this one is hard up.

Clarence. Who, weary of a dull and selfish existence would fain take to himself a loving wife.

Clara. I think, sir, that your proposal is rather premature. Before people marry they should be quite sure they love.

Clarence. You're right, quite right, to take this view! (*Sentimentally.*) But, oh, listen to me! Can you not believe that there is such a thing as love at first sight? I love you, adore you! I implore you to take what I offer, my hand and my heart. The moment my eyes fell upon your lovely face, I felt that we could part never again!

Clara. (*Agitated.*) Sir, what will you think of me, but it is true. The instant I saw you, I trembled! I feel that I might return your love. But do you think so sudden a passion could be a lasting one?

Clarence. Should I live for ever, no woman shall rob you of the heart you have won.

Clara. Never is a long time, and women are clever. I fear that some day you will take up with some flirt, and then what would become of me?

Clarence. I swear that I adore you, and you alone. (*Aside.*) I'd give worlds to know her *number*. From her voice, she ought to be the independent soprano.

Clara. (*Aside.*) His face, that is, his *side* face, is Clarence's, ten years older. Can it possibly be he?

Clarence. (*Aside—trying to recollect.*) She reminds me forcibly of some girl I was once in love with, but which, I can't for the life of me remember! (*Aloud.*) There will, I presume, be some slight details to be gone through, some trifling matters of form, before I can call you mine legally.

Clara. Just a *few*. Before taking the serious step we contemplate, I should like to be satisfied on one or two points.

Clarence. (*Bowing.*) I am quite at your service. (*Aside.*) Whether as one thousand, three hundred and four, or six hundred and two.

Clara. I should first like to learn, from your own lips, that, up to the present time, you have *never* loved. That is a *sine qua non* to our union; and that what you have just expressed to me with so much fervor and, I may add, fluency, has not been previously rehearsed to others.

Clarence. I see nothing unnatural, (*aside*) I wish I knew which she was, (*aloud*) in your being suspicious of the whole of that sex to which it is my misfortune to belong. As a rule, they are, no doubt, unprofitable investments; but to every rule there are, as you know, (*tenderly*) some exceptions. I am one of those very rare ones.

Clara. Am I really to understand—don't trifle with a sensitive nature—

Clarence. (*Aside.*) Or a handsome annuity.

Clara. (*Continuing.*) That I have caused your heart to beat for the first time in a life that must have turned it's thirtieth year.

Clarence. (*Aside.*) 'But looks younger.' (*Aloud.*) You have taken the very words out of my mouth. Ah, you indeed read too plainly the feeling which prompts such thoughts.

Clara. (*Aside.*) I think I *do*. (*Aloud.*) And you have *never* fancied you were in love, not even when a boy, *never* had the most innocent flirtation?

Clarence. I can echo the word '*never*' without the slightest hesitation.

Clara. (*Aside.*) So I perceive. (*Aloud.*) And have *never* been loved?

Clarence. Not that I am aware of.

Clara. I cannot bear to think that when we are married, and happy, some poor girl may perhaps be breaking her heart, in secret, on your account.

Clarence. You need have no anxiety on that score, I assure you.

Clara. You relieve me greatly.

(*Takes up husband's portrait, which she looks at.*)

Clarence. And now, without being so exacting as you have been,

may I ask you, too, one question—not that your answer, whatever it may be, need interfere with our projects.

Clara. You have the right to ask anything.

Clarence. Putting on one side, of course, the defunct,—(*CLARA, while CLARENCE is searching on ground for words, kisses portrait*)—have you never loved?

Clara. Putting on one side, (*puls down portrait*) of course, as you say—the—the defunct, my heart has nothing to answer for, but——

Clarence. “But——” (*Aside.*) Here it comes.

Clara. (*Continuing.*) When I was fifteen, an innocent flirtation with a beardless boy, who was destined for the army. I fancied, at that time, that I was desperately in love, but it was only a girl’s fancy, and it left no trace behind after the cause was once removed.

Clarence. And is the cause, as you call it, still alive? Is there no danger, were you to meet again, of that fancy returning?

Clara. None, whatever. But I don’t think Clarence, *that* was his name, can be alive. He had, at sixteen, such a morbid taste for suicide, that, if he is not the most inconsistent man in the world, he must, long ere this, have fallen a victim to his own hand.

(*CLARA takes up her husband’s portrait again, and plays with it.*)

Clarence. A taste for suicide! What an idiot! Might I enquire one thing more?

Clara. You may.

Clarence. Whose portrait is (*pointing to portrait in her hand*) *that*, to which you seem so attached?

Clara. (*Naturally.*) Whose portrait? Oh, I don’t know, I’m sure. The landlady’s young man, I suppose. This is a furnished house, and *this* is one of the ornaments. I’ve a trick of playing with anything that falls in my way.

Clarence. (*Aside.*) That’s a pleasant announcement. (*Aloud.*) Would you (*holds out his hand towards portrait*) allow me to judge of the landlady’s taste? (*Takes portrait, and, on recognising it, bursts out laughing.*) By Jove, it is *he*! and no mistake! The world is small indeed!

Clara. (*Aside.*) Smaller than he thinks! (*Aloud.*) And who is *he*, may I ask?

Clarence. The colonel of my regiment, by all that’s martial. A very dashing fellow, but the most widely disseminated flirt I ever came across.

Clara. (*Aside.*) Tom a flirt! I won’t believe it. (*Aloud.*) So it appears.

Clarence. Fancy finding his portrait here, ha, ha, ha! He’s married, too, which makes it worse!

Clara. A thousand times! Is the lady pretty?

Clarence. I never saw her. But I’ll bet the *landlady* is, or *she* wouldn’t be the possessor of that portrait.

Clara. She is rather nice-looking. Talking of portraits, if you would make me quite happy, tell me that no one in the world possesses your likeness. I could not bear to think of your effigy, in full face, or even in profile, hanging round another woman's neck.

Clarence. But one person in the whole world has that chance; and, as the portrait in question is twelve inches by eight, I don't think he's likely to avail himself of it.

Clara. You said "he," did you not?

Clarence. I did.

Clara. That relieves me. (*Aside.*) "Full length carte, in uniform, with Editor." Why, this is Lon's correspondent. I mustn't stand in her way any longer. (*Aloud, to CLARENCE.*) Will you excuse me for a few minutes? (*CLARENCE bows.*) I've some orders to give. I shan't be long. (*Aside, near door.*) It's Clarence, I can almost swear. (*Exit.*)

Clarence. She's mine, without a doubt—that is, if she's got the annuity! If not, I must try the other string to my bow, and "fill the fearful cavity in the heart of three hundred and six." (*Picks up envelope he has addressed to LOUISE, and which she has dropped.*) And I shan't have far to go, it appears, for here is the cover of my advertisement, addressed to that fortunate number. Why, they must live under the same roof. Perhaps, she's the colonel's landlady. Oh, for a key to this mystery. Oh, that some happy thought would suggest which is the rich one. My course don't seem quite clear. However, I'll plight my troth to both. As it now stands the law won't allow me to marry but one of them, though—but never mind!

Enter LOUISE.

Louise. (*Speaking low and mysteriously at first.*) Hush! Are you alone?

Clarence. (*Aside.*) The landlady, I suppose. (*Aloud.*) Quite alone.

Louise. I cannot be mistaken, From your appearance you are, are you not, number—

Clarence. (*Interrupting her.*) I am! (*Aside.*) The other widow, by jove! (*Aloud.*) And you are, my heart whispers to me—

Louise. (*Quickly.*) You are right. (*Looking all round the room—low.*) But we must be cautious. I have a friend in this house, who must not be aware of this meeting.

Clarence. (*Mysteriously.*) I see! (*Aside.*) She's jealous of my intended. (*Aloud.*) Your friend is—

Louise. A widow, like myself, but a designing one.

Clarence. With a fine soprano voice, and a handsome annuity.

Louise. She has some good notes—

Clarence. (*Aside.*) Just what I want.

Louise. (*Continuing.*) In her voice, but I never heard of her having any at her banker's.

Clarence. (*Aside.*) Then this must be the one.

Louise. And now, tell me, how did you find out where I lived?

Clarence. Did you ever play at magic music?

Louise. Often.

Clarence. You remember that as you draw nearer (*draws nearer*) to the object you are seeking, the music becomes louder and louder.

(*LOUISE draws back a little.*)

Louise. (*Puzzled.*) Yes, but I don't quite see.

Clarence. Did you love, as I love, you would know what I mean. You were the object I was seeking, and as I approached the enchanted villa you inhabit, the music of my heart beat louder, and louder. Ah, it was magic music, indeed, till, at last, it guided me, thank Heaven, to your presence.

Louise. I think it was very clever of you.

Clarence. (*Aside.*) I think it was.

Louise. It must have been the result of considerable experience.

Clarence. No! The effect of involuntary instinct. I did but follow—

Louise. (*Aside.*) Mary Jane, who took him for the footman.

Clarence. I did but follow the course of true love.

Louise. Which will, for once, run smooth, if you can give me satisfactory answers to one or two questions.

Clarence. Ask me anything.

Louise. (*Pointing to chair.*) Pray, sit down. (*They both sit down—LOUISE near table.*) Tell me how old you were when you fell in love for the first time.

Clarence. But a few minutes younger than I am now.

Louise. (*In disappointed tone.*) You don't mean to tell me you have never been in love before! Why, if I mistake not, you must be thirty, or twenty-nine, at the very least.

Clarence. (*Aside.*) "But looks younger." (*Aloud.*) You appear disappointed.

Louise. I am. (*Aside.*) I expected some confessions.

Clarence. Then I will no longer deceive you. The first time I really loved, passionately, as I then thought, I was but sixteen—

Louise. Ah, this is much better.

Clarence. The object of that love was still under the tutelage of the mistress of a finishing school.

Louise. As I was.

Clarence. (*Continuing.*) A steep wall, with broken glass on the top, barred me from the presence of my—Louise, I think her name was—but that is a detail of no consequence.

Louise. Pray go on. This is deeply interesting! (*Aside.*) It must be Clarence.

Clarence. Though intimately acquainted, at a distance, we never met but once. Louise—I am sure that was her name—had leave to spend the day with her aunt.

Louise. Was it a happy day?

Clarence. No; she did not come up to my expectations. She went so far as to give me a lock of her hair.

Louise. (*Aside.*) My governess'.

(*Takes up the portrait of her husband, and plays with it.*)

Clarence. But refused to elope with me, because I hadn't money enough.

Louise. (*Indignantly.*) Mercenary creature! She was not worthy of you.

Clarence. From what I remember of her, I don't think she was.

Louise. Fortunately, you had almost forgotten her.

Clarence. Entirely, till you reminded me of her.

Louise. You, too, remind me of some one. Would you oblige me by turning your head?

Clarence. You have already turned it.

Louise. (*Making sign.*) This way, you remind me of some one I once met, but where, or when, I can't remember. (*CLARENCE turns full face to her.*) No; it's not your full face, it's your profile.

Clarence. (*Turning his head.*) So?

Louise. Yes, so. (*Aside.*) The outline is Clarence's, minus the (*making sign*) eyelash, (*takes up portrait of her husband*) and plus the bristles.

Clarence. (*Pointing to portrait.*) Is that the person I remind you of?

Louise. (*Naturally.*) This person?

Clarence. Yes! You seem curiously attracted towards that portrait.

Louise. (*Naturally.*) Only because it's such a good photograph. What progress the art of portrait-taking has made in the last ten years. (*Handing portrait to CLARENCE.*) It's some relation of the landlady, I suppose.

Clarence. (*Taking portrait, and recognizing it as that of the major of his regiment, bursts out laughing.*) Ha, ha, ha! Well this beats anything I ever came across in all my life.

Louise. Pray don't keep so good a joke to yourself.

Clarence. Why this is the major of my regiment, who's clearly been making love to the same woman as my colonel. (*Pointing to portrait on the other table.*) Why, there's his portrait. It's one of the best things I ever heard of.

Louise. What, the colonel and major of the regiment you hope soon to command?

Clarence. Sooner than they think, poor fellows! No one can survive the climate. The heat is intolerable.

Louise. Do you know the major well?

Clarence. I thought I knew him well; an illustration of how thoroughly one can be taken in, in this world.

Louise. It does happen, sometimes.

Clarence. (*Putting down the portrait.*) I really believed that fellow to be excessively attached to his wife, and here I find his like-

ness publicly exposed in the first house I come into. What would his poor wife say, if she knew it?

Louise. It's enough to prevent one's re-marrying. Men are all alike, I suppose.

Clarence. Not all. You would have to search far and wide before you could (*LOUISE lays her hand naturally on her writing-desk, on table*) put your hand on my portrait.

Louise. (*Aside, taking out black profile from desk.*) I should like to make a bet about that!

Clarence. And should you like to go out West?

Louise. Oh, yes; as wife of a major.

Clarence. The mail, which is due to-day, will probably bring good news.

Louise. (*Tenderly.*) I hope it will. (*Postman's knock is heard at the outside door.*) How strange! there is the post.

(*LOUISE runs to door and exit.*)

Clarence. The plot is what they call thickening! During the last half-hour I have distinctly offered to part with myself to *two* bereft young women, and, what's more, I have been accepted, I may say, with considerable rapture by *both*. My only regret is, that *one* should be born to disappointment; but *which*? that is the question. But here comes the sentimental soprano again.

Enter CLARA, with open letter in her hand.

Clara. I trust you'll excuse so long an absence. The post came in.

Clarence. I hope it brought good news.

Clara. Yes, for me, but for you 'tis bad, I fear, for it will needs curtail your visit.

Clarence. (*With agitation.*) My visit! You fill me with alarm. To try and win you cannot be wrong!

Clara. If you stay too long, it may be thought so. It costs me much to say good-bye, but I dare not bid you stay.

Clarence. Pray, tell me why!

Clara. I am filled with anguish; my heart will break, but you must leave me. You can come some other day. Go away, now, if you love me!

Clarence. But what's the reason? Pray do tell me. What is the necessity of breaking your heart? Come, let me stay and we will take counsel together.

Clara. There are reasons which compel me to implore you to leave me. Your presence here will get me into an awful row.

Clarence. But what is the necessity for a row? (*Aside.*) Can it be that she is going back on me? (*Aloud.*) Ah, think what a happy day we might spend together.

Clara. No, it is impossible! Since we parted, not half an hour ago, events have happened—

Clarence. (*Aside.*) She must have been listening! How mean!

Clara. Which render our union—at present, at least—quite out of the question.

Enter LOUISE, unperceived by CLARENCE, and comes quietly to one side of him, CLARA being on the other.

Clarence. (To CLARA.) Oh, believe me, what you may have over-head was only spoken in jest. I love but you!

(LOUISE smiles, still unperceived by CLARENCE.)

Clara. I overheard nothing. The case is simply this:—When you asked me, just now, to marry you—

Louise. (Finishing sentence.) I thought that the news from Dakota would have left me free.

Clarence. (Having started, and turned round to LOUISE, on hearing her voice.) Left you free?

Clara. (Continuing.) To choose a successor.

Clarence. (Aside.) Scylla and Charybdis is a trifle to this.

Louise. (Continuing.) But as I have just received a letter from that insalubrious station—

Clara. (Continuing.) To say that my husband, the Colonel—

Clarence. Your husband? Then you're not a widow?

Clara. Only a grass one.

Louise. (Continuing.) Accompanied by my husband, the Major—

Clarence. Your husband? Then you're not a widow, either?

Louise. Only a grass one! (Continuing.) Will be here in a very few minutes.

Clarence. (Alarmed.) Here! You don't mean that?

(Takes up his hat.)

Clara. You anticipate me, I see, in concluding—

Louise. That the presence of another man—

Clara. (Indignantly.) Under his very roof! (Aside.) It's really too bad!

Louise. Might lead to complications—

Clarence. Which I would not be the cause of for worlds.

(Looks anxiously towards the door.)

Clara. Had it not been for this contretemps—

Louise. Were the marriage-laws less stringent—

Clara. I need not tell you—

Louise. That having an annuity with which I could have paid our traveling expenses.

Clarence. (Aside.) My lost Louise.

Clara. That being in a position to render double suicide no longer necessary—

Clarence. (Aside.) The faithless Clara.

Clara and Louise. (Together.) We might have been happy yet!

Clarence. We might, indeed!

Clara. As it is, there is nothing left for me but to return—

(Feels in her pocket for profit)

Louise. (Producing profile.) The profile you gave me long ago, *(gives CLARENCE the profile, which he holds in his hand)* when I spent the day with my aunt.

Clarence. (Looking at profile.) Ah, I thought so.

Clara. (Producing profile.) The sticking-plaster outline *(gives profile to CLARENCE, who holds it in his hand)* you presented me with in the cemetery. when you swore you would never forget me.

Clarence. (Looking at profile.) Ah, I knew I could not be mistaken.

Louise. And now, pray, what have you to say in answer to the charge of gross infidelity we bring against you?

Clarence. (Holding a profile in each hand and looking at them.) Well, in the face——

Clara and Louise. (Together.) Side-face!

Clarence. (Continuing.) Of such evidence as this, I have nothing left me but to plead guilty——

Clara and Louise. (Enquiringly.) To?

Clarence. Constancy to my two first loves. But, have you nothing to answer for?

Clara. We may have, if you stay, to those who alone have the right to question us.

Clarence. They may possibly object to having been made away with, even in theory.

Louise. Not if it saved their wives from a premature death——

Clara. From stagnation!

Clarence. If I have been the means of retarding that dismal doom, I have nothing to regret.

Louise. And you promise to bear us no malice?

Clara. Never to refer to the "Matrimonial News?"

Clarence. Never! if you will swear not to sell me to the regiment.

Clara and Louise. (Looking up to Heaven in a solemn manner, each hold out a hand to take CLARENCE'S, but unconsciously shake each other's hand.) We swear!

Clarence. And should we meet some future time, if circumstances happen to be more favorable; should any unforeseen event have occurred, *(widows pretend to be horrified)* may I not cherish the hope that one of you will remain faithful to the regiment?

Louise. As it is, I fear there is nothing to be done:

Clara. (R.C.) Not in our present peculiar position. For though we are practically two poor lonely widows, bereft of our husbands, still we think it would hardly do for you to marry us both.

Clarence. (C.) Especially as the husbands are still in the land of the living, and at this moment, perhaps, near at hand. Forgive me, dear ladies, *(he pretends to weep)* if I—cannot——

Louise. (L.C.) Rejoice with us, that after to-day we are no more to be widows of that class called grass.

CURTAIN.

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